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ABSTRACT

Approximately 3,300 teachers and 72,000 students in grades K-12 were surveyed regarding their general opinions and feelings towards standardized achievement tests. For purposes of analysis, teacher and student questionnaire responses were divided into three groups: (1) public schools systems with fewer than 500 students per grade; (2) public school systems with more than 500 students per grade; and (3) all non-public school systems. The teacher questionnaire contained eleven semantic differential scales utilizing the following bipolar adjectives: easy-hard, helpful-harmful, unbiased-biased, useful-useless, fair-unfair, valid-invalid, calm-anxious, comfortable-uncomfortable, interested-uninterested, knowledgeable-not knowledgeable, and supportive-antagonistic. The student portion was administered orally, immediately following administration of the Metropolitan Achievement Tests. Questions pertained to feelings of nervousness before taking tests, the degree of difficulty, fairness, and anxiety about the test results. Both groups had generally positive attitudes towards standardized achievement tests. (BH)

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Abstract

Comments From the Classroom: Teachers' and Students' Opinions of Achievement Tests

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In recent years, the value of standardized educational tests has been questioned with increasing frequency and the use of such instruments has received sustained criticism from certain groups. To shed some light on this topic, approximately 3,300 teachers and 72,000 students responded to a questionnaire exploring their general opinions and feelings about standardized achievement tests. The polling of these two groups directly after the administration of such a test, coupled with their generally positive attitudes, is a clear indication that the dire pictures painted by testing opponents have little factual basis except in isolated cases.

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Introduction

The 1970's have been characterized by many problems in education, e.g., diminishing enrollments, escalating costs to maintain services, attacks on the weak academic skills of our high school graduates. In the area of educational tests and measurements, probably the most vocal and sustained criticism has been aimed at the value of standardized tests.

A quick perusal of the professional literature points out that most of the criticisms against standardized tests have been essays rather than reports of research conducted. (For example, see Houts, 1977.) Nonetheless, some excellent work has been done that was both objective and scientific. Kirkland (1971) reviewed the effects of tests on students and schools. Other studies surveyed adults (Brim, 1965; Brim, Neulinger, & Glass, 1965), secondary school students (Brim, Goslin, Glass, & Goldberg, 1964; Neulinger, 1966), high school teachers and counselors (Brim et al., 1964), elementary principals in the Northeast (Goslin, Epstein, & Hallock, 1965), fifth grade pupils (Goslin, 1967), and elementary and secondary counselors and teachers (Cormany, 1974). A comprehensive survey of Scholastic Aptitude Test takers concerning their opinions of the test has been conducted by Response Analysis Corporation (1978).

Purposes

While research has been conducted in the area of attitudes toward standardized testing, most has been in the context of ability testing and has included mostly as respondents those with secondary attachments to such tests: parents, counselors, principals. Teachers' and their students' attitudes toward standardized achievement testing have not been systematically explored to date.

With the above points in mind, the purposes of this research were to explore 1) teachers' general opinions and feelings about standardized achievement tests and 2) students' attitudes toward such tests directly following administration of such a test.

Survey Instrument and Procedures

A questionnaire was developed to elicit responses to the purposes outlined above. The teacher portion contained 11 semantic differential scales surveying teachers' general opinions and feelings. Examples of the bi-polar adjective descriptors include: helpful-harmful, unbiased-biased, calm-anxious, and supportive-antagonistic. The student portion was administered orally by the teacher; teachers recorded the number of hands raised in response to questions like: "How many of you were nervous just before you took this test?" "How do you feel about the test now?" and "Would you like to take a test like this one next year?"

The sample was based on the Spring, 1978 standardization sample for the Metropolitan Achievement Tests. All teachers and students included in

the standardization program were included in the sample for this study. The student sample was selected to represent the national population in terms of geographic region, school system enrollment, socioeconomic status, and public vs. non-public school affiliation. A socioeconomic index based on a combination of median family income and percentage of adults in the school district who were high school graduates was used for selecting the sample. The sample consisted of approximately 3,500 teachers and 75,000 pupils in Grades K-12.

Although the questionnaire was not pilot tested prior to its administration, it was reviewed and revised by various editorial and administrative staff members. The mechanics of the questionnaire design, phrasing, comprehensiveness, etc. were all improved by the various revisions.

Results

By the established cut-off date, the median response rate across all grades was approximately 95 percent for both teachers and students. For the purposes of analysis, teacher and pupil questionnaires were divided into three groups: 1) public school systems with fewer than 500 students per grade [Group 1], 2) public school systems with more than 500 students per grade [Group 2], and 3) all non-public school systems [Group 3].

1. Teacher Attitudes

Table 1 summarizes teachers' responses to six semantic differential scales on their general opinions toward standardized achievement tests. (Although the questionnaire used a seven-point scale, data were collapsed

Table 1

Teachers' General Opinions of Standardized Achievement Tests[1,2]

Dimensions[3]	Total Sample	Grades Combined			Groups Combined		
		Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Grades K-4	Grades 5-8	Grades 9-12
Easy							
1-2	2	3	2	2	1	4	8
3-5	76	78	75	73	67	84	85
6-7	22	19	23	25	32	12	7
Hard							
Helpful							
1-2	24	23	22	27	21	29	25
3-5	69	71	70	67	71	66	69
6-7	7	6	8	6	8	5	6
Harmful							
Unbiased							
1-2	18	17	16	21	17	18	19
3-5	69	72	66	67	68	69	69
6-7	13	11	18	12	15	13	12
Biased							
Useful							
1-2	26	25	25	31	23	32	26
3-5	64	66	64	61	65	61	67
6-7	10	9	11	8	12	7	7
Useless							
Fair							
1-2	25	25	23	28	20	28	28
3-5	63	65	63	60	64	63	64
6-7	12	10	14	12	16	9	8
Unfair							
Valid							
1-2	16	15	16	19	13	20	19
3-5	72	73	70	71	73	70	72
6-7	12	12	14	10	14	10	9
Invalid							

[1]Numbers are expressed in percents.

[2]Group 1 = Teachers in systems enrolling fewer than 500 students per grade.
Group 2 = Teachers in systems enrolling 500 or more students per grade.
Group 3 = Teachers in non-public school systems.

[3]Although the questionnaire used a seven-point scale, data were collapsed into a three-point scale range for summary purposes.

into a three-point scale range for summary purposes.) Overall, teachers in the sample did not feel that such tests were easy. Across grades, fewer teachers in school systems with under 500 students per grade (Group 1) considered tests more difficult than teachers in Group 2 (teachers in systems with 500 or more students per grade). Twenty-five percent of the non-public school teachers (Group 3) rated such tests hard. Across groups, teachers of students in the higher grades felt the tests were not as hard as did teachers in the lower, primary grades.

For the total sample, over 90% thought that standardized achievement tests were to some extent helpful. Non-public and small system school teachers found them somewhat more helpful than the other group. By grade, teachers in Grades 5-8 found such tests more helpful than teachers in the other two grade groups.

Over 85 percent of the teachers rated standardized achievement tests as unbiased. Group and grade differences on this question were small.

Concerning usefulness, 90 percent of the total group felt that to some extent they were useful. Non-public school teachers found them most useful; across groups, teachers in Grades 5-8 found them most useful.

On the "fair-unfair" scale, only 12 percent of the total sample of teachers thought that standardized achievement tests were, for the most part, unfair. Slightly more public school teachers in larger systems rated tests unfair than either of the other two groups. The teachers in the primary grades rated tests less fair than did teachers in Grades 5-12.

On the topic of the validity of standardized achievement tests, more non-public school teachers considered such tests valid than the other two groups of teachers.

Table 2 summarizes teachers' personal feelings toward standardized achievement tests. Overall, the teachers sampled felt calm toward such tests with only seven percent expressing marked anxiety toward them. Teachers in Grades K-4 were more anxious about the tests than were teachers in other grades.

On the "comfortable-uncomfortable" continuum, only seven percent of the total sample expressed real discomfort toward standardized achievement tests. Across groups and grades, the percentages were similar.

More than 95 percent of the teachers felt somewhat knowledgeable concerning standardized achievement tests. Teachers in Groups 2 and 3 felt more knowledgeable about such tests than those in Group 1. Primary and elementary school teachers felt more knowledgeable than did high school teachers.

Teachers in large public schools were least supportive toward standardized achievement tests; non-public school teachers were the most supportive. Across groups, teachers in Grades 5-8 were most supportive. Overall, only five percent of the respondents were severely antagonistic toward such tests, while almost one-third were supportive.

Table 2

Teachers' Personal Feelings Toward Standardized Achievement Tests[1,2]

Dimensions[3]	Total Sample	Grades Combined			Groups Combined		
		Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	K-4	5-8	9-12
Calm							
1-2	42	42	42	41	38	46	45
3-5	51	52	50	52	55	48	49
6-7	7	6	8	7	7	6	6
Anxious							
Comfortable							
1-2	38	38	37	40	35	41	39
3-5	55	56	55	55	59	52	55
6-7	7	6	8	5	6	7	6
Uncomfortable							
Interested							
1-2	37	36	34	41	36	40	31
3-5	55	57	57	54	57	53	59
6-7	8	7	9	5	7	7	10
Uninterested							
Knowledgeable							
1-2	34	30	36	37	34	33	29
3-5	64	67	62	61	64	65	67
6-7	2	3	2	2	2	2	4
Not Knowledgeable							
Supportive							
1-2	32	31	27	39	30	36	29
3-5	63	64	65	57	64	60	66
6-7	5	5	8	4	6	4	5
Antagonistic							

[1]Numbers are expressed in percents.

[2]Group 1 = Teachers in systems enrolling fewer than 500 students per grade.
Group 2 = Teachers in systems enrolling 500 or more students per grade.
Group 3 = Teachers in non-public school systems.

[3]Although the questionnaire used a seven-point scale, data were collapsed into a three-point scale range for summary purposes.

2. Student Attitudes

Table 3 outlines Grade K-4 students' opinions toward standardized achievement tests. Two questions posed concerned their feelings 1) just before and 2) just after they took the test. Relevant data are presented in the top half of Table 3. For the total sample of students in Grades K-4, a significant proportion had more positive feelings after the test was administered. No significant differences were seen among the three groups. Gradewise, Grade K-2 students showed less of an increase in positive feelings than Grade 3 and 4 students. Across groups and grades, the bulk of the increase in positive feelings was attributable to a decrease in ambivalent feelings.

When asked, "How many of you were nervous just before you took this test?", 56 percent of the Grades K-4 students responded. Slightly fewer non-public school students were nervous than public school students. Students in Grades 3 and 4 were more nervous than students in Grades K-2.

The last question asked of students in Grades K-4 was, "Would you like to take a test like this one next year?" Approximately half of all students in the K-4 sample said "No." A lower percentage of non-public school students said "No" than in either of the two public school groups. More students in Grades K-2 wanted to take such a test next year than students in Grades 3 and 4. Similarly, there were fewer "Don't knows" for this younger group.

Table 3

Students' Opinions Toward An Administration of A Standardized Achievement Test: Grades K-4[1]

Dimensions	Total Sample		Grades Combined						Groups Combined			
			Group 1		Group 2		Group 3		Gr. K-2		Gr. 3,4	
	%		%		%		%		%		%	
FEELINGS TOWARD TEST:[2]	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
	37	58	36	58	38	58	41	62	47	62	26	54
	19	14	19	14	18	13	22	16	15	12	23	16
	22	10	23	10	21	10	19	8	16	7	29	13
	9	7	9	6	10	7	9	4	9	6	9	7
	13	11	13	12	13	12	9	10	13	13	13	10
PERCENT NERVOUS JUST BEFORE TEST	56		57		57		52		52		61	
WOULD YOU WANT TO TAKE ANOTHER SUCH A TEST NEXT YEAR?												
PERCENT ANSWERING:												
YES	38		36		38		46		41		36	
NO	48		51		47		39		48		47	
DON'T KNOW/NOT SURE	14		13		15		15		11		17	

[1]Group 1 = Students in systems enrolling less than 500 students per grade.
Group 2 = Students in systems enrolling 500 or more students per grade.
Group 3 = Students in non-public school systems.

[2]The first percent represents students' feelings just before the test administration; the second percent represents students' feelings just after the test administration.

Table 4 presents responses to the questions asked of students in Grades 5-12. When asked, "Which type of test do you think is usually harder: the type of test you just took or the type of test your teachers make up?", twice as many students in the sample responded that teacher-made tests were harder. Across grades, more Group 3 students were in agreement on this point than either of the two public school groups. Across groups, the proportion who thought teacher-made tests were harder than standardized tests goes up fourfold in the high schools.

When asked, "Do you think the test questions [on the standardized achievement test you just took] were generally fair?", three-quarters of all students sampled on this question thought they were. Differences across groups and grades were small.

Seventy-five percent of all students sampled thought they did "well" or "ok/all right"; almost 20 percent did not know how they did. Students in small public systems thought they did less well than did students in the other two groups; high-school students thought they did better than students in Grades 5-8.

When asked, "In general, how do you feel about the type of test you just took?" approximately 25% felt positively, 25% felt negatively, and 50% were neutral. More non-public school students felt positively, and more large public school system students felt negatively than any other group. High-school students felt less positively than students in Grades 5-8.

Table 4

Students' Opinions Toward Standardized and Classroom Achievement Testing: Grades 5-12[1]

Questions	Total Sample	Grades Combined			Groups Combined	
		Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Gr. 5-8	Gr. 9-12
	%	%	%	%	%	%
"Which type of test do you think is usually harder: type of test you just took or the type of test your teachers make up?"						
-Standardized Tests	30	29	35	25	36	16
-Teacher-made tests	59	60	54	66	54	73
-Don't know	11	11	11	9	10	11
"The test you just took is supposed to show what you already have learned and what you do not know yet. Do you think the test questions were generally fair?"						
-Yes	75	75	73	79	74	78
-No	14	15	15	11	16	11
-Don't Know	11	10	12	10	10	11
"How do you feel you did on this test?"						
-Well	27	23	30	31	25	31
-Ok/All Right	48	49	47	46	48	48
-Poorly	7	9	6	4	8	5
-Don't Know	18	19	17	19	19	16
"In general, how do you feel about the type of test you just took?"						
-Positive	26	25	24	34	29	18
-Negative	27	27	30	20	27	29
-Neutral/Unsure	47	48	46	46	44	53

Table 4 (contd)

Students' Opinions Toward Standardized and Classroom Achievement Testing: Grades 5-12[1]

Questions	Total Sample	Grades Combined			Groups Combined	
		Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Gr. 5-8	Gr. 9-12
"Would you be interested in finding out your scores on the test you just took?"						
-Yes	88	87	88	93	90	84
-No	7	8	7	4	6	10
-Not Sure	5	5	5	3	4	6
"Would you like the chance to discuss with your teacher the correct answers to the test you just took?"						
-Yes	43	39	46	50	48	31
-No	44	47	41	38	39	55
-Not Sure	13	14	13	12	13	14
"How many of you get nervous just before you take a test like the one you just took?"	30	28	33	31	37	13
"How many of you get nervous just before you take the kind of test your teachers make up?"	64	62	64	69	61	71

[1]Group 1 = Students in systems enrolling fewer than 500 students per grade.
Group 2 = Students in systems enrolling 500 or more students per grade.
Group 3 = Students in non-public school systems.

Overwhelmingly, students across all groups and grades were interested in finding out their scores on the test. When asked, "Would you like the chance to discuss with your teacher the correct answers to the test you just took?", the proportion of students responding "Yes" dropped significantly--by more than half. Once again, non-public school students were more interested in discussing the correct answers than were students in the public schools. Also, students in Grades 5-8 were more interested in discussing the correct answers than were high school students.

Finally, students were asked about their nervousness before taking standardized achievement and teacher-made tests. More than twice as many students got nervous before taking a teacher-made test than a standardized achievement test. More non-public school students were nervous before teacher-made tests than were public school students. High school students were more nervous prior to taking a teacher-made test and less nervous prior to taking a standardized achievement than students in Grades 5-8. Comparing these data with those of the K-4 sample, almost twice as many students in Grades K-4 were nervous before taking a standardized achievement test than students in Grades 5-12.

Educational Significance

This study provides a data base from a nationally representative sample of teachers and students across all grades. To the authors' knowledge, this has been the first time such a large-scale data gathering operation has been undertaken to assemble teachers' and students' attitudes toward

achievement testing. The polling of these two groups directly after the administration of such a test (for which teachers received only the test results), coupled with their generally positive attitudes, is a clear indication that the dire pictures painted by testing opponents have very little factual basis except in isolated cases.

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